

Managing and Supervising During Organizational Change Colorado State Employee Assistance Program

Embrace the process of change. If the rate of change in your department or division exceeds your own rate of change as a supervisor/manager, you're going to be faced with some significant challenges. It is important to manage the change process itself. Try to be flexible and adapt.

Keep a positive attitude. This is totally within your control. Seek out the opportunities that change presents. The best approach is to balance compassion and understanding with realistic optimism.

Minimize job ambiguity. Organizational change usually creates a higher level of uncertainty for employees. You are wise to clear up the "unknowns" as much as possible. Don't be general and vague. Rather, frame employee duties and assignments in specific terms and focus on short-range goals. If appropriate, clearly redefine job responsibilities. Because organizational change is distracting for employees, clear guidance from you will help keep your employees on track.

Establish organizational priorities. Priorities often shift during times of change. There will be many people and problems vying for your time. Those who make the most noise should not necessarily get the most attention. Avoid acting in a fire-fighting mode, and be clear (with yourself and others) about what is most important.

Get resistance to change out in the open. A certain amount of resistance is normal. Expect it, and invite it. When you do that, you will create opportunities to analyze the resistance and work toward overcoming it.

Balance the need to get the job done with allowing time for the grieving process. Most likely, there is more work to be done than ever. It is better for employees' mental health (and for company morale) if they are busy rather than having time on their hands to worry or to romanticize the past. Don't lower your performance expectations. At the same time, keep in mind that employees WILL need an adjustment period to come out of shock and experience their losses (ex: loss of valued coworkers who have lost their jobs, loss of job security, loss of trust, loss of control). The grief process is often the same as the grief process that follows the death of a spouse or friend. (Stages of Grief:

Denial/Shock/Isolation, Anger, Negotiation/Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance)

Allow emotional expression. Be tolerant of emotional displays, even when some of the hostility gets directed at you. Ordinarily, you are not the real target. It is natural for employees to experience fear, anxiety, bitterness, distrust, anger, depression, self-pity, and guilt. Provide opportunities for employees to vent. Instead of condemning employees or disallowing their feelings, allow some time in meetings for employees to express themselves. It's part of the healing process.

Don't try to cover all the bases yourself. Concentrate on effective delegation during this period. This can keep you from spreading yourself too thin. Also, good delegation gives employees a sense of involvement and an opportunity to share in the responsibility for change.

Create a supportive work environment. Change is accepted more readily in a supportive environment. If employees feel threatened, insecure, or vulnerable, they will be reluctant to embrace new ways of doing things at work. Give positive reinforcement as soon as you see work behavior moving in the right direction. Create a psychologically safe atmosphere in which people flourish, an atmosphere in which change can take root.

Rebuild morale. Change sometimes knocks the wind out of a work group. Spirit dies. Morale goes flat. The quality of work life suffers as employees succumb to "corporate battle fatigue." Lots of reasons: heavier workloads, insecurity, frustration, confusion, job stress, and feeling unappreciated. Answer? Pay attention to people. Value them, and help them develop a sense of belonging.

Pass out more "psychological paychecks." Even when increases in pay and benefits are not possible, there is no limit to the intangible rewards you can provide for employees. Don't underestimate the value employees place on simple things such as a word of encouragement or a compliment from you. Listen and show empathy. Ask for their opinion, and call them by their name.

Communicate. This is no time to lose touch with employees. Normal communication channels probably won't be working as well as usual, and the rumor mill will be in high gear. Meanwhile, employees will be hungry for information and answers. Remember that communication is a two-way street:

- Provide opportunities for employee input to you, and be a careful listener. Take more time with employees. Be available, and ask more questions. Consider “managing by wandering around,” and make it clear that you are accessible.
- Provide as much information as possible, and strive to be specific rather than vague, candid rather than guarded. Clear up rumors and misinformation that clutter the information channels. ***It's next to impossible to over communicate during times of change and transition!***

Seek out bad news. Part of your job is to find, and then face up to, the problems and frustrations that routinely occur during times of organizational change. Reward employees who identify problems and report organizational breakdowns. Don't shoot the messengers. If employees say there is a problem, take it seriously. Remember that old saying that perception is reality?

Don't take current employees for granted. Sometimes employees grow weary of the uncertainty regarding their future jobs and decide to leave. Typically, they are more willing than usual to consider job opportunities offered elsewhere. (It's the good swimmers that are most likely to jump ship!) Let employees know that you want them and appreciate them, and remember that the workplace of the future will be dealing with a shortage of workers!

Call C-SEAP for additional information or to arrange for organizational assistance regarding layoffs, reorganization, or other major changes in the workplace: 303-866-4314 or 800-821-8154.